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Journeys in gang masculinity

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Abstract

Drawing on formal interviews and ethnographic participant observation this paper highlights how effective gang intervention programmes can and do supplant negativistic masculine identities based on violent criminality with more positivistic masculine identities based on gainful employment, family life and desistance. The authors examine how this transition occurs at three prominent gang intervention programmes in diverse transnational contexts: Los Angeles, Glasgow and Copenhagen. In contrast to earlier work, the paper also examines how gang members can revert back to negativistic masculine identities, criminality and violence when the support that these programmes provide is withdrawn.

Keywords:

gangs, masculinity, identities, desistance, recidivism

Introduction: masculinity, violence, gangs and desistance

For young men who have become marginalized through the strain that may emerge as a result of disadvantaged social backgrounds, negative peer networks and lack of opportunities for employment (Agnew 2006), crime may provide a means of enacting a hegemonic male identity when other resources and opportunities are unavailable (Messerschmidt 1993; Muncie 2009; Carrington, McIntosh and Scott 2010; Holligan and Deuchar 2015). One of the most common behaviors used to achieve a masculine identity, especially for working class males, is violence, often in performed in symbolic practice such as competitive sports or participation in paramilitary culture, for example. (Weinberg and Around 1952; Loy 1969; Hantover 1978; Messner 1990; Gibson 1994; Evans et al 1998; Wacquant 2004) In contemporary western working class communities, hegemonic masculine characteristics typically prioritise physical strength, competitiveness, assertiveness and overt heterosexual behaviour combined with the rejection of femininity and weakness (Miller 1958; Hantover 1978; Gibson 1994; Evans et al 1998; Keddie 2003). The term ‘protest masculinity’ appropriates the psychoanalytic nature of ‘masculine protest’: as Tomsen (2008:95) describes, it refers to ‘a gender identity that is characteristic of men in a marginal social location with the masculine claim on power contradicted by economic and social weaknesses. Within this general context, hyper-masculine aggressive displays of criminal violence may be used as a means of regaining hegemonic status, and through a process of differential association may become expressed within the context of gangs (Deuchar 2009, 2013; Holligan and Deuchar 2015). Thus gang members typically depend on negativistic masculine identities associated with criminality and violence, in order to create status for themselves where they are blocked from conventional pursuits by racial/xenophobic bias, social exclusion and economic disadvantage.

In considering how best to support young men to desist from criminality and violence (whether gang-related or not), it is important to recognize the complex nature of the transition process. Carlsson (2012:4) highlights the salient nature of ‘turning points’ in the criminal desistance process. A turning point represents a change in the life course of an offender, which in turn stimulates the motivation to make a change in his/her offending behaviour. However, it is also important to acknowledge the ‘zig-zag path’ of offending (Carlsson 2012:4): offenders may oscillate between periods of offending and long gaps between them (Decker and Lauritsen 2002; Haigh 2009; Soothill and Francis 2009; Pyrooz and Decker 2011; Decker, Pyrooz and Moule 2014), thus reflecting Matza’s (1964) concept of ‘drift’.

A central element in the process of desistance is the ‘knifing off’ of offenders from their immediate environment through introducing them to new social contexts that bring increased structure and routine (Laub and Sampson 2003:145; Maruna and Roy 2007). Some have also argued that desistance is best understood within the context of human relationships, and that social bonds can generate social capital which leads to increased participation and inclusion in wider society (McNeill and Maruna 2008; McNeill 2009). In recent years, criminologists have also convincingly argued that desistance is not just about transformations in offenders’ circumstances or relationships, but also involves (inter) subjective processes such as desisters’ reconstructions of identities (Maruna 2001). A small body of our own previous research (Deuchar et al. 2016; Søgaaard et al. 2016) has thus focused on exploring how reformatory institutions can help young men develop new resources for expressing wider, more ‘pro-social’ masculine identities and the extent to which they may disrupt or reinforce notions of masculinity that contribute to sustained criminal behaviour.

While Decker et al. (2014) found that the role of service agencies was the least reliable institution gang members could rely on for support over the course of their desistance trajectory, numerous studies have found evidence of the effectiveness of gang intervention

programmes in facilitating gang desistance (Flores 2014; Sogaard et al. 2016; Deuchar et al. 2016). Carlsson (2013:19) highlights the way in which some reformed offenders may begin to use their criminal history within the context of such reformatory institutions in such a way that is ‘in accordance with the norms of adulthood and masculinity’; they thus become a ‘mentor’, ‘role-model’ or ‘father-figure’ to others, in such a way that may assist them in being able to distance themselves from the past and enable them to ‘do masculinity’ in the present (Carlsson 2013:20).

Inspired by the writing of Raewyn Connell (2005), in this paper we focus on the conceptualisation of masculinity in the plural sense. The paper seeks to explore how reformatory interventions by service agencies in different parts of the world may help male gang members to problematize subcultural constructions of idealized notions of hegemonic or hyper-masculinities (Connell 2005). In addition, it focuses on examining the ways in which participation in such programmes may enable them to take small steps in re-defining their masculine identities, to respond to the social pressures and strains they may encounter and the personal repercussions of violent lifestyles they may have experienced in less destructive ways that might help them succeed in their criminal desistance efforts (Densley 2013; Deuchar et al. 2016). Perhaps most significantly though, this paper also considers the effects on the gang and criminal desistance trajectory when intervention support is withdrawn or gang members are expelled from gang intervention programs.

Methodology

In this paper we attempt to explore the impact of reformatory intervention programmes on male gang members in different socio-cultural contexts, from a transatlantic perspective. In so doing, we recognize the need to be sensitive to the particular socio-cultural contexts found in the communities that experience gang violence within each of our selected

settings. Specifically, we focus on one American city (Los Angeles, California) and two European cities (Glasgow, Scotland and Copenhagen, Denmark). We chose to compare the gang issues and interventions within the context of these three cities because of their varied and in some ways contrasting socio-cultural contexts and particular histories with gang-related issues. In the most socially deprived communities of Los Angeles, around 90 percent of the population are either Latino and/or African American, whereas in Glasgow less than 10 percent of those living in the most deprived communities are non-white and around three quarters of the population within the less affluent communities in and around Copenhagen are ethnic Danes. While the county and city of Los Angeles has at times been described as the ‘gang capital’ of the United States, with a history of gang violence spanning the better part of a century (Vigil 1988), the earliest recorded gangs in Glasgow date back to the late nineteenth century and the city itself has long been characterized by a working class ethos where young men traditionally project a tough masculine image driven by a ‘culture of honor’ (Deuchar 2016:71). Conversely, Copenhagen is a relative newcomer to street gang culture, although the issue has come to be seen as a growing phenomenon over the last 20 years (Mørck et al, 2013). However, although the history of gang culture and the nature of the violence associated with it is different in each of the three cities (with a predominance of firearms incidents in L.A. and Copenhagen, compared to knife-related incidents in Glasgow), all three settings have suffered from a process of deindustrialisation that has disadvantaged working class young males. In the case of Los Angeles and Copenhagen, non-white young males from socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods have been particularly marginalized, while in homogenous Glasgow gang culture involves predominantly the white working class.

We set out to examine the extent to, and ways in which, specific gang interventions may enable young males to problematize subcultural constructions of hyper-masculinity predicated on criminal gang activity. We were particularly interested in exploring the ways in

which the programmes may help to nurture alternative masculine identity constructions that do not entail criminal behaviour, and what happens to gang members when institutional support is withdrawn. Accordingly, in both Los Angeles and Glasgow we selected programmes that have gained considerable national and international interest in recent years. In Los Angeles we selected *Homeboy Industries* – an internationally recognized and emulated nonprofit organization focused on offering rehabilitative and employment-related services for formerly incarcerated and/or gang involved persons. In Glasgow we selected the *Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)* – a multi-agency gang violence prevention initiative modeled on an initiative in Cincinnati, Ohio and implemented in Glasgow from 2008-2011. In Copenhagen, we focused on one relatively new Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO), a boxing gym turned intervention programme called *Comeback* that provides gang members with an alternative to mainstream ‘exit’ programmes through a focus on boxing as an alternative to criminal gang activity.

Our approach across all three sites employed the ethnographic research method of ‘participant as observer’. In employing this methodology, we maintained transparency with the research population by communicating our research intentions to the young men, staff and mentors within the organizations and programmes but also participated actively alongside them, observed them informally during their daily activities and explored their views and insights through qualitative interviews and personal interaction (Gold 1958). The authors’ common involvement in weight-lifting and combat sports as well as author XXXXX’s background as a gang involved youth facilitated engagement with research subjects and the employees and administrators of these programmes. The collective purpose of the observations and interviews was to explore the social, emotional and (in some cases) spiritual engagement that the organizations and initiatives initiated among gang members, and the extent to – and ways in which – this engagement supported them in beginning to

problematize caustic subcultural constructions of masculinity in a way that lent itself to supporting them in their desistance efforts; and whether the effects of these intervention efforts persisted after support was withdrawn.

In the following sections, we outline the more specific nature of each of the focused initiatives, details of our data gathering approaches and the insights we gained within the context of each of the intervention sites in the form of case studies. Pseudonyms are used to describe the research participants throughout, and each case study is followed by a short analytical discussion. We then draw a set of discursive insights from across the case studies in the final section of the paper.

Case study 1: *Homeboy Industries, Los Angeles*

Since its founding in 1988 under the name, *Jobs For a Future*, a modest non-profit employment referral organization for gang members, *Homeboy Industries* has progressively evolved into the biggest and most renowned gang intervention programme in the world (Choi and Kiesner 2007; Boyle 2010). Following the organizational mantra, ‘Nothing stops a bullet like a job’, over the years *Homeboy Industries* has launched a series of ambitious business ventures with the intent not of creating profit, but of providing stable employment and job training for gang members and/or formerly incarcerated persons. This has proved an effective intervention strategy by providing gang members substitutes for criminal and violent masculine identities in alternative masculine identities based on fatherhood and serving as breadwinners for their families. (Craib 1987) In addition *Homeboy Industries* offers a plethora of social services and education programmes (for further insights, see Deuchar 2018 forthcoming).

While author XXXXX has been observing Homeboy Industries consistently since 2012 as part of his ongoing research, during the spring of 2015 author XXXXXXXX spent a

week at *Homeboy Industries* observing and conducting a series of 10 life history interviews with young male trainees enrolled in the programmes and employed at *Homeboy Industries* (most of whom were reforming Crip, Blood and Sureno-affiliated gang members, between the ages of 25-35 years). Follow-up semi-structured interviews were also conducted with staff members (most of whom were also formerly incarcerated and/or gang involved), including Navigators who serve as both mentors and supervisors for trainees at *Homeboy Industries*.

The young men talked about the wide-ranging social and cultural marginalization they had experienced during their formative years. In addition to the legacy of racial oppression and economic exploitation in the marginalized communities they were raised in within East, South-East and South Los Angeles, they also described difficult family lives dominated by parental drug addiction and criminality. All of them turned towards gang membership as a means of gaining a sense of status and identity, and many described the way in which a hegemonic focus on ‘protest’ masculinity was very prevalent within their street cultures (see also Deuchar 2018 forthcoming):

For a long time, I believed ... in my mind I was always going to be a street soldier or warrior ‘till I got older and then I would become that guy that everybody looks up to in the neighbourhood. (*Jack*)

I remember my mum always told me, ‘gang members are bad and don’t ever hang around with those people. The more I was told that, I ended up doing even more ... I thought it was cool they’re all driving in nice cars and they have money and nice clothes ... kind of bring that tough image too ... this is why people would be scared of you, intimidated by you, you know? (*Paul*)

The overarching mission of *Homeboy Industries*, publically articulated within Boyle's (2010) memoir *Tattoos on the Heart*, was to build a sense of community among gang members, soaked with a focus on love, respect and tenderness (Deuchar 2018 forthcoming):

If love is the answer, community is the context and tenderness is the methodology. It's the thing that connects people ... in the old days we would get a job and we'd send them, 'Hey they're hiring over there, good – next!' ... but they hadn't healed ... a job is nice but the healing is forever.' (*Father Greg Boyle*)

Participant observation of the various programmes and activities within the organization illustrated the way in which the community-building process was operationalized. For example, it was often enacted during the daily 'thought for the day' sessions when all staff, gang members and volunteers gathered to share personal insights and journeys each day:

At this point, a young man named Steven comes to the floor to talk about what Homeboys means to him. 'I want to thank the Homeboy family – I've had ups and downs while I've been here, but I see the world more clearly now and I want to say – just keep fighting. You're all on the truck – and love and kinship is what keeps the truck going.' (Field notes)

The young men described the wide variety of rehabilitation and education classes that they engaged in, employment opportunities they had taken up and the way in which they were beginning to acquire qualifications and résumés and become focused on positive

destinations. The support offered to them by their Navigators and other mentors within *Homeboy Industries* was clearly beneficial. Navigators helped them to enroll in school and college programmes, register with classes and attend job interviews as well as ensuring that trainees maintained the expectations of their employment and attended rehabilitation classes and did not relapse into drug addiction and other destructive behaviour. Further, drug and alcohol sponsors offered personal support to trainees with their continuing struggles with drug or alcohol dependency:

The navigators are there in the morning, there in the evening, there before I leave. They're the ones that guide me, 'Ok you're not doing this right, you're not doing that ... get off your phone ... put in some more effort ...' (*Juan*)

Every time a situation happens, or any time there's anger involved I feel like getting high because that eliminates the problem, it just takes the pain away ... so every time I get those urges, I call my sponsor's number. (*Antonio*)

Importantly, it was the other co-workers and trainees that the young men felt that they gained the most encouragement from. Whenever they became tempted to retreat back into a world of gang violence, drug dependency and crime they frequently called one another up and supported each other through it, particularly during weekends when the temptations were harder. Many described the way in which the sense of community within the programmes and the opportunities they gained from sharing their own personal stories transitional journeys with each other were beginning to have a profound impact on them, whereby they began to grow in empathy towards those they used to fight against and developed a greater appreciation for their own and other people's struggles:

I hear everybody's stories. Like there's people that have lost their kids, they say maybe the cops found out that they were doing drugs and their kids were in the house ... and they listen to other stories ... [and] they support me because everybody gives me advice. (*Mick*)

(Father G) has a saying that he always says, 'once you learn to see yourself in others somehow the world changes' ... that's the way I translate it ... and you know, you start appreciating it more, you know?' (*Francisco*)

By building a sense of compassion and forming a supportive community around each other, the young men were beginning to problematize their prior constructions of masculinity and find alternative ways of expressing their sense of manhood:

Now the unlimited possibilities are not criminal in any way whatsoever, it's being a good father for my family. I'm trying to do the best of my ability to be a good father and enjoy the world for that. (*Lorenzo*)

I started thinking about my kids ... I grew up without my father, I didn't want that for them ... that changed me and just got me to just quit all that and get a good job. You know, make the money in the right way ... trying to do good now for the kids. Like I'm working, like I try to ... save money for them ... to go to college later on, in the future. (*Anthony*)

The *Homeboy Industries* programme was clearly creating therapeutic spaces that were characterised by opportunities for expressing compassion and generativity as well as offering

practical and economic support. In turn the young men were breaking down their prior social, cultural and territorial barriers and gaining a new sense of status from alternative constructions of masculinity focused on family responsibilities and legitimate ways of earning a living.

However, there were a number of cases observed since 2012 of gang members who had been either fired or let go from *Homeboy Industries*, which resulted in a withdrawal of support and a return to gang activity and criminal behavior on the part of gang members who had been expelled from the programme for various reasons. On a number of occasions, in the span of around two weeks, due to no fault of their own, dozens of clients were let go due to budget shortfalls at *Homeboy Industries*, a number of whom reverted to gang activity and criminal behavior.

In one case, a client in his early 40s from South Los Angeles with an extensive history as an active prison gang member was funneled into a job at a local auto parts supplier after being let go by *Homeboy Industries* due to an unexpected budget shortfall. However, after two years of working there at below a living wage, with no chance of improving his salary or position, he abruptly quit and reverted back to criminal behavior such as carrying a gun, selling guns, getting into regular fights and going on ‘missions’ to shoot rival gang members. During informal conversation, he articulated a sense of guilt for reverting to gang activity after desisting during the time he was satisfactorily employed:

You know what homes, I know I’m fucking up, but aye my boy what can I do? Dispensa I don’t even feel like a man no more homes. I kick it with a jaina (woman) and I can’t even pay for dinner, you know what I mean? I might fuck her for a couple weeks, but then she realizes I ain’t about shit. I don’t got no feria (money) and I can’t contribute, so what’s she gonna do? She gotta kick me to the curb and be with a vato that could take care of her. So it’s like what am I gonna do? Fuck it, I’m gonna put it

down for the hood. I took a lot of lives homes, so if it's my turn, then caile wey (bring it on). If I get life, fuck it homes. I already been there. I can do that. This is where I'm struggling. (*Carlos*)

In another notable case a young gang member in his early 20s from Boyle Heights who had been let go as a result of a budget shortfall reverted to hanging out with his gang cohort in his neighborhood and was shot and nearly killed by rival gang members, resulting in the partial paralysis of one side of his body. Ironically he was later hired back at *Homeboy Industries* and has been working there as recently as 2016. His presence is a constant reminder of what can happen if one finds oneself without the employment and support that *Homeboy Industries* offers.

Case Study 2: *Community Initiative to Reduce Violence, Glasgow*

In 2008, the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit (which at that time fell under the auspices of Strathclyde Police but subsequently expanded to a national service following the founding of Police Scotland in 2013) established the *Community Initiative to Reduce Violence (CIRV)*. Based on a similar model in Cincinnati, Ohio, *CIRV* created a partnership among police, social services, education, housing and community safety services along with local communities, and delivered the clear message that 'the violence must stop' (VRU 2011; Deuchar 2013). The initiative was implemented in the east end and north of Glasgow, targeting approximately 1000 young people (mainly young men with an age-range of 12-19 years) who were consistently on the police radar because of their involvement in gang violence. Young offenders attended 'call-in' sessions in Glasgow Sheriff Court and were literally warned that, if they continued to involve themselves in violence, then criminal justice repercussions would ensue. Alongside the message of enforcement was a softer

message of empathy and the offer of support, where former offenders spoke about their own experiences of making positive changes in their lives and mothers of offenders appealed to them to make alternative choices. The sessions ended with messages of hope, where a range of agencies aligned to *CIRV* made a range of services and programmes available to those young men who agreed to change their lifestyles.

The initiative thus drew upon a range of existing services in Glasgow together with some new programmes which were tailor-made to meet the needs of the young clients, and which in some cases benefited from targeted Scottish Government funding (VRU 2011; Deuchar 2013). Across the period of implementation, just under 500 clients (predominantly young men) participated in ten ‘call-in’ sessions, and many went on to engage in follow-on services within a range of statutory, voluntary and ‘third sector’ agencies.

Following initial participant observation of ‘call in’ sessions and intervention programmes offered to young offenders combined with the implementation of semi-structured interviews with members of the inter-professional agencies who were involved in designing, managing and/or implementing *CIRV*, life history interviews were conducted with eight young men. Each of the young men came from communities in the east and north of Glasgow that were the focus for *CIRV* and had become engaged with the *CIRV* initiative as clients and/or volunteers.

All of the young men highlighted the oppressive impact of poverty and lack of opportunity brought about by economic marginality within their local communities. Added to this, all of them identified wider, family-based pressures that they experienced during their formative years such as witnessing domestic violence or experiencing parental rejection due to drug abuse (Deuchar 2013). All of this led to negativistic behaviour and a tendency towards ‘toxic’ forms of hyper-masculinity where they sought to achieve status through the

carrying of weapons and involvement in gang violence (Kupers 2005; Deuchar 2009, 2013; Fraser 2015).

Several of the young men had been exposed to prison sentences that provided little or no deterrent effect or opportunities for rehabilitation or aftercare. They described leaving prison still suffering from multiple distress, and encountering barriers to re-integration. Some repeatedly re-offended and/or used illicit drugs as a means of dealing with the social pressures they experienced, thus demonstrating the limitations of a punitive, criminalizing approach to youth crime and violence (Barry 2011). However, attending the 'call-in' sessions helped them to look at their continuing participation in violence in new ways:

It was an eye-opener. Like, at the end we had a victim, like a woman who lost her son through gang fightin', she was talking at the end. I thought, 'I don't want ma gran to go through that.' (*Matt*)

A new feeling of hope emerged among the young men once they engaged in the various follow-on interventions within CIRV. Involvement in the programme enabled them to begin to re-consider their views on masculinity and their involvement in gang violence. For example, some became motivated by the new status they gained from engaging in paid work placements and being able to provide for their families (Deuchar 2013):

You could provide for your son, you had pride in yourself as a dad because you could take your son oot, you could dae a bit of shoppin' ... you could pay your bills ... it gave you a bit of self-belief. (*Colin*)

I was stable ... when I was goin' home, takin' money home to the misses (wife) and the wean (child) and providin' for them. (*Stevie*)

The young men found that the opportunities offered to them by some of the agencies to engage in issues-based workshops with rival gang members and recreational activities combined with the intense social and emotional support given to them by social work teams and mentors helped them to begin to desist from territorial-based gang violence. Some of the participants became mentors and role models to others; they tried to encourage other young men to consider alternative ways of viewing masculinity that didn't involve violence:

They probably think if they get brought up in a certain area you must get into a gang, you must, it's a kinda 'rite of passage'. Whereas if you say to them, 'no, you don't need to do that, that's actually the easy option, if you want to show that you're a real tough guy, get an apprenticeship if you can. (*Fergus*)

In some cases, there was an intense feeling of personal growth and development among those who became personal mentors on the programmes. For instance, Harry and Joel both described the way in which supporting others through sharing their own desistance narratives with them helped them to move further away from lifestyles associated with crime and drug dependency themselves:

The progress you seen from when you met these boys was second to none, it was really good ... they had a purpose, they had somebody, it was as if they had another pal they could talk to ... you're basically tryin' to help them oot of it ... the feeling I got wi' it was, it was brilliant 'cause you'd helped somebody, basically, you helped

them to better their selves ... you're tryin' to stable yoursel'. You don't want to turn up and try and help somebody when you're havin' drug issues. (*Harry*)

It's just moved me further and further away from that way of life ... I was caught in that wee bit of thinkin', 'how are some of these young boys not seein' it? I'm no' really gettin' results'... forgettin' that I'm a result... what I'm givin' away, I'm keepin'. (*Joel*)

However, after the programme was abruptly ended in 2011 following government funding cuts (Deuchar 2013), many of the young men found themselves unable to secure employment, as three of them frustratedly described to us:

I've been in and out of labourin' jobs (but) never had a permanent contract ... I've even had to sell drugs to try and make some money ... that's the only thing you can fall back on to try and get money, you know what I mean? You go back to what you know n'all that. (*Harry, Stevie and Billy*)

The young men were returned to their original circumstances faced with the same social and structural barriers to employment that they had before (McNeill 2012). Several found themselves facing the same obstacles, trials, and temptations that led to their criminal behavior and could not continue their trajectory toward desistance (Deuchar 2013; Deuchar et al. 2016).

Case Study 3: *Comeback, Copenhagen*

Comeback is a non-government organisation (NGO) located on the outskirts of Copenhagen, which was founded in 2010 by former Danish boxing champion. *Comeback*

implements a rehabilitation program set within the context of a large boxing gym as an alternative to the mainstream gang 'exit' programs run by official Danish authorities. By adopting the 'participant as observer' role, both authors participated in the boxing training sessions and recreational activities alongside the young men, while also observing and analysing their participation in the training and rehabilitation sessions, their interactions with each other and the coaches, mentors and staff, as well as discussing with them their insights and views about their personal lives and transitional journeys.

Life history interviews were also conducted with 8 of the participating young men (who had an age-range of 18-25). Within the context of these interviews, the first author explored in more depth the young men's life experiences, their reactions to social, cultural and transitional experiences, their views on the boxing/rehabilitation programme and their thoughts about the future. In addition, semi-structured interviews were also conducted with staff members on the programme as a means of gaining additional insight into the focus of the training sessions and support programmes and the challenges that the young men faced in their lives.

All of the young men described the way in which they had grown up in areas of social deprivation in and around the community where *Comeback* was based. All of the young men were first or second generation immigrants with origins in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Somalia and Africa, and they described the racialization and multiple marginalization they had experienced that made them susceptible to gang culture (Vigil 1988):

Danish society looks down on Muslims ... it got worse after the 11th September ... almost 50% of ethnic Danes are racist even though they won't admit it (*Ehsan*)

I would love to work every day ... (but) if you are from another country, no. Maybe 200 times they will say 'no' to you, because you have another name than a Danish name ... I'm thinking sometimes, 'what the fuck I'm doing in this country' ... everybody is racist. (*Sabir*)

The young men described the way in which they began to hang around on the streets from a young age, and became involved in petty crime. Since all their other friends were members of street gangs, in many cases they too became part of the gang culture and gradually progressed to participating in more organised crime involving drugs and violence. They offered a range of reasons for first participating in gang culture, violence and crime. In some cases it was as a result of peer pressure, while in others it was caused by strong feelings of being marginalized as a result of poverty and social disadvantage. Those pressures, coupled with the constant experience of being criminalized by the police, led the young men to engage in a life of crime, which gradually became addictive for them, creating a mindset and a lifestyle that was difficult to leave behind:

People are thinking we are gang members ... police stop us every time. If they see us in the car, they check us. (*Aabir*)

I almost have to strip when I meet (the police) ... I can't go out because if I don't leave the discos they will arrest me. (*Masshir*)

Against the backdrop of the intense feelings of stigmatism and social exclusion that the young men felt, the boxing gym provided them with an opportunity to escape from some of the pressures and with a much-needed level of structure, routine and focus. For some

young men, their attraction to boxing had first come about because they viewed boxing as a ‘man’s sport’, often associated with criminals, and because of their desire to become stronger and better equipped for fighting:

Here you can get good physical and when you are on street ... you can kick more ass.

(Sabir)

I just heard there was some boxing in jail, new boxing. I just came here basically to learn to box, you know? That could be a weapon too, I think, to learn how to box and defend yourself and knock someone out with one punch, you know? That’s what I was thinking, that’s why I started here ...I could defend myself, I could hit one knockout, you know? *(Najid)*

In his famous work on boxers in South Chicago, Wacquant (2004) describes boxing as the ‘manly art’, a term he uses to emphasise that boxing – more than many other sport – is intimately linked to traditional notions of masculinity. In boxing, key masculine values such as courage, strength, stamina and bodily domination of space and of other men are played out in the most dramatic way (Wacquant 2004). Within *Comeback*, traditionally masculine activities and symbolism were embedded within the boxing gym, as the following excerpts from the first author’s field notes illustrate (see also Deuchar et al. 2016):

Marc opens the door of the boxing club, and the first sight that greets me in the entranceway is a large framed picture of Mohammed Ali declaring ‘I am the greatest’. It occurs to me that this first impression will be a motivating one for young guys who are looking for a way out of the street life, without sacrificing their felt

sense of masculinity in the process. We walk along the corridor and open the next door; as the light creeps into the hallway through the open door, I see the outline of a large boxing ring – the quintessential masculine space where every young guy wants to be in order to feel like a man ... beyond the imposing ring which is positioned four feet off the floor is a an impressive range of weight lifting equipment, including a bench press, squat rack, a row of dumbbells of all weights as well as a pull-up bar and cables machine (Field notes)

The physical equipment, images, symbolism and iconography appeared to be the factors that made it socially acceptable for the young men to be enrolled in the rehabilitation program. Most of the young men and coaches within the programme agreed that participating in boxing, or the activities that surrounded it (such as weight lifting, punching the bags or practicing sparring with a partner on the boxing pads) created an important opportunity to channel aggression and thereby provided an outlet for the young men to practice masculine identities within a legal context:

I really enjoy weight lifting because it's a good way of getting out the aggression.
(*Maashir*)

It's much better, focusing on the bag and punching the bag ... you go and shoot this guy, they give you ten years in prison but if you just punched a bag, they can do nothing with you! (*Rafik*)

Like the aggression side ... and control of yourself and getting back into shape ... there's a lot of people have a lot of anger inside of them because they don't get enough energy out during the day but when you come here, you train ... (it brings)

relief, relaxation, because your thoughts, everything ... all your problems ... it just, not disappears, but it gets put to the side, you know? (*Nasser*)

However, in spite of the fact that many of the young men spoke positively about their training and viewed it as a channel for expressing masculine identities, the boxing ring largely remained empty on a daily basis within the club. Indeed, several of the staff within the club commented about the way in which boxing in the ring played a secondary role to the other aspects that were attractive to the young men, and that the prospect of actively training, sparring and fighting could actually present them with the danger of becoming demasculated in front of their peers (Deuchar et al. 2016):

When they first come in, we try and get them to join in and say – ‘now is the training time’, but when that time comes, they won’t come over to the boxing, they will go to the weights and do weights. Because they are in their comfort zone there. (*Aaron, manager*)

It’s a working class temple ... the values the boys meet in the context of boxing are the same values that they see in the street – it’s fight, it’s flee, it’s courage ... (but) some of them don’t go into the boxing but have come into this temple. As in churches, you can see there’s a lot of people going into churches to find peace but they aren’t coming there because they’re religious, they come there to find peace ... it’s the same in the boxing club ... the boxing is the smallest part ... it’s everything around it, the counselling, the workshops, the stuff like that’s the big part. (*Peter, Director*)

The coaches and staff members all agreed that the club was not simply about encouraging young men to become boxers, or even to keep fit. The intensely masculine image of boxing was seen as a context that made it more acceptable for the young men to be in the rehabilitation program, but the real value of being there emerged from their exposure to various forms of social, economic and emotional support. Indeed, it was acknowledged that introducing the young men to therapeutic counselling sessions was the most important part of the process. Boxing metaphors were regularly used in therapeutic sessions – as a framework and vocabulary for the coaches and wider staff to encourage the young men to discuss and think through their personal situations and dilemmas and to reflect upon how best to avoid trouble and succeed in a society that continues to marginalize them (Deuchar et al. 2016).

The female staff psychologist within the club reiterated the view that boxing was simply used as a context which made it more acceptable for the young men to be in the club and which enabled them to break loose from their former roles and self-understandings as being ‘losers’, ‘criminals’ or ‘gang members’. The celebration of the hyper-masculine identity encapsulated in ‘the boxer’ and ‘the ring’ was complemented in the club by the presence of the therapy room, which the young men tended to refer to as the ‘sparring room’, but which was characterized by soft lighting, comfortable chairs, candles, aromatherapy oils and engagement with predominantly female staff. The construction of ‘feminine’ spaces and roles here created crucial opportunities for the young men to adopt softer versions of masculinity within the safety of the boxing gym where their masculinity was protected. This hook and lure strategy was used to encourage the young men to open up and discuss their emotions during subtle therapeutic counseling sessions that they likely would not have engaged in outside the context of the boxing gym. While the young men seemed more likely to reveal their worries and emotions to the female staff than to the male staff or the other young men, their expressions of emotional hardship did not seem to fundamentally challenge

their masculine self-understanding, in part because this was done in a context defined by unquestionable masculinity, the boxing gym.

The consistent use of boxing metaphors during the discussions that the coaches and mentors have is fascinating. Even in the therapy room – the one they call the ‘sparring room’ – they still use the boxing ring as a context for discussion. We also hear a lot of the boys refer to the psychologist as the ‘cutter’ – the one who can fix things. (Field notes)

Some of the men who were now coaches themselves were able to look back and acknowledge the way in which the workshops and counselling sessions, guided by a focus on boxing metaphors, had enabled them to manage their own anger more effectively, find their own inner peace, deal with situations in life with a greater level of focus and achieve a healthier balance between fighting for their goals in life while also knowing when to retreat and reflect:

You learn to control your anger. You have to know when to use your anger at the right moment (in boxing) and when to focus and when to get comfortable ... they learned me how to take this and put it in my life ... it’s very important I’d say, ‘cos you come here and find yourself. If you have a bad day, a bad morning, you want to think about things, you want quiet ... I learn to breathe and think about things and then come out again. (*Obaid*)

Like, in the ring when you start to fight some people just fight, fight, fight. After 20 seconds they’re out of energy ‘cos they ... like to use all their energy at once and that

is also in real life. Some people don't have that ability to just take a deep breath and ... then you look at it in a different way. (*Najid*)

It was evident that many of the young men felt secure and content while they were in the club, and that their involvement in the programme increased their capacity for anger management and enhanced their ability to take fledgling steps towards desistance from street violence and criminal activity (McNeill 2012). However, as in the previous case study from Glasgow, many of the young men expressed the view that they were still very much in transition, struggling against the temptation towards reoffending or retreatism because of the social and structural pressures associated with continued economic and social marginalization, demonization by the police and their inability to find jobs because of their criminal records:

I don't have a normal life, I don't have work, a home, I don't have a car, I don't have any of these things. (*Marcus*)

However, as was the case with the previous two case studies discussed, some of the young men eventually drop out of the program and find themselves in difficult circumstances without the support that the program offers them. In one particularly unfortunate case, a young man who had been involved in the program relapsed into hard drug use and withdrew from the program, reverting back to a criminal lifestyle. The Director of the programme, Peter, took it upon himself to seek out the young man in order to get him off the streets and back into the program. When Peter located the young man he became agitated as a result of a multi-day long drug binge he had engaged in and pulled a knife on Peter and accidentally cut Peter's hand quite severely when Peter attempted to disarm him. It was an unfortunate

incident, and while Peter did everything he could to help the young man, even selflessly putting himself in harm's way, in the aftermath of the incident the young man fled the country in order to avoid criminal charges as a result of the incident.

As the above case study illustrates, in spite of the positive impact that the *Comeback* programme had on enabling them to adopt broader masculinity identity constructions within the safety of the boxing gym and to nurture desistance-related attitudes, the continued marginalization, demonization and criminalization they experienced by their host society compelled them to become bearers of frontier masculinity through falling back into violence and crime whenever they experienced failure within the programme (Carrington et al. 2010).

Concluding Discussion

In this paper we have provided a diverse cohort of case studies from different cities in very different socio-cultural contexts in order to show how gang intervention programmes, even in very different socio-cultural contexts, can successfully provide alternative sources of status and masculine identity to gang members, which facilitate their desistance from crime and gang identity. Barry (2006) argues that the nurturing of criminal desistance attitudes often stems from the acquisition of social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986). The case study on *Homeboy Industries* illustrates that, by offering the young men employment as well as participation in the rehabilitation and education programmes, the intervention enabled them to accumulate job skills, job tenure, qualifications and a vision for specific positive destinations (cultural capital); new social networks and routines (social capital); and an ability to earn money (economic capital) (Robson 2009).

However, the work *Homeboy Industries* went beyond a basic focus on providing employability skills and education for the young male offenders. In his seminal work on criminal desistance, Maruna (2001) argues that, in order to truly understand offenders, we need to understand and listen to the stories that they tell. Among the young men in *Homeboy*

Industries, it was evident that their personal narratives of offending behaviour as well as their progressive journeys and positive turning-points were viewed as assets to be shared with others as a stimulus for social integration, mutual support and healing (Carlsson 2013). By nurturing a community-oriented ethos, soaked with love, compassion, empathy and inclusive spirituality, Father Boyle and the wider *Homeboy Industries* mentors (most of whom were reformed offenders themselves) supported a symbiotic process of retroflexive rehabilitation, whereby help-givers were often helped along with help-receivers (Cressey 1955; Maruna 2001; see also Barry 2006).

The young men were clearly becoming ‘wounded healers’, whereby their personal narratives and redemption scripts were used as the basis for generativity (Maruna 2001; Barry 2006; Weaver 2016). In so doing, social and cultural divisions were broken down among Crip, Blood and Sureno gang members and – in the process – the young men confronted and problematized deeply engrained attitudes and values connected to a hyper-masculinity constructed around criminalized identities. They appeared to become more willing to perform broader versions of the dominated enactment of masculinity that had characterized their previous periods as gang members and offenders (Deuchar et al. 2016; Søgaaard et al. 2016; Deuchar, 2018 forthcoming). This meant that ‘doing masculinity’ began to be seen as being synonymous with doing the right thing as partners, fathers and family men (Weaver, 2016).

In the Glasgow case study, the CIRV programme supported young male offenders’ journeys towards desistance in several ways. Whether young men engaged in CIRV as clients, volunteers or both, positive institutional influences, supportive relationships and the opportunity to take on generative activities and expend social and emotional capital led to a ‘knifing off’ effect that stimulated desistance (Laub and Sampson, 2003; Deuchar, 2013). In particular, as in the previous case study the opportunity to become ‘wounded healers’, sharing their redemption scripts as generative activities, had the greatest impact (Maruna,

2001). Similarly to *Homeboy Industries*, this process, along with the accumulation of employability skills, enabled the young men to identify with alternative forms of masculine identity, which were conducive to forming desistance-related attitudes.

In Denmark, the insights from *Comeback* illustrate that strategies to rehabilitate young men involved in gang activity are often best employed where they are framed within a masculine context providing them participants with an alternative narrative to maintain their own masculine identities (Carlsson 2012). In this sense, the use of boxing metaphors as part of a holistic, integrated rehabilitative approach for young male offenders takes on real significance (Wright, 2006). The masculine context of the boxing ring enabled the young men to become motivated enough to engage with the programme while still supporting them in challenging and problematizing their entrenched perceptions of masculinity being associated with criminal identities.

The links between masculinity and desistance is a core theme in the gang desistance literature (Flores 2001; Decker et al. 2014; Deuchar et al. 2016; Sogaard et al. 2016); however, we have also considered what happens to gang members when support and employment opportunities provided by intervention programmes are rescinded. In each of these contexts, when participants lost the support and employment that the programme provided them, they found themselves facing the same racial bias, social exclusion and economic disadvantage that predicated their gang involvement in the first place, facing all of the many facets of multiple marginality that propel marginalized populations the world over into criminal behaviour and gang identity (Vigil 1988; Hagedorn 2008).

Thus the study reinforces the importance of gang intervention programmes that provide opportunities for gang members to have the space to construct positivistic masculine identities to replace negativistic masculine identities, because in the absence of that support gang members can quickly revert back to relying on the negativistic masculine identities and

illicit economic opportunities that gang membership and criminal activity affords them. However, this also implies another critique of the strategy of using gang intervention programmes to address gang crime as a public policy, in that these programmes can only facilitate gang desistance for the limited number of gang members they can employ and provide support to. In such cases, those gang members who are successfully desisting from gang activity are only doing so because of the employment and support that the intervention programme provides. Without that support, they would have a strong chance of reverting back to negativistic masculine identities and criminality in order to provide for themselves. Lacking the support that insulated them from the destabilizing effects of the multiple marginality they face, they are likely to revert to the only source of masculine identity and economic opportunity available to them, gang membership and criminality.

We hope that future research in the gang desistance literature will further examine the trajectories of gang members after they lose the support of the intervention programmes that engendered their desistance from gangs.

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